

You Shall Not Pass

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Ten Modals are more than a little weird,
Can, could, must, may, might,
Ought to, will, would, shall, should,
So much of Fate foretold in the grammar.

So much of grammar ghosted with ancient Wyrð.¹
What *should* I do? What on earth *will* be?
You *shall* not pass, said Gandalf
To the Balrog at Khazad-Dûm.

Here arises, however, a textual variant.
Wise Tolkien wrote, You *cannot* pass.²
Actor Ian McKellan spake, You *shall* not pass,³
Theatrically stronger and semantically better.

The slow forgetting of *shall* I will lament,
Since *Beowulf* and 700 AD has this ancient modal served.
“He is a man, and that for him ... is sufficient tragedy,”⁴
So *shall* speaks strongly—of determination, of courage, of Time.⁵

NOTES

1. Wyrð. 1.a. “The principle, power, or agency by which events are predetermined; fate, destiny.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2018. Web, 16 August 2018.
2. “The Bridge of Khazad-Dûm.” *The Fellowship of the Ring*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1966. Print.
3. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Ian McKellan, et. al. New Line Cinema, 2001. Film.
4. “... it is in *Beowulf* that a poet has devoted a whole poem to the theme... man at war with the hostile world, and his inevitable overthrow in Time Men with courage as their stay went forward to that battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat He is a man, and that for him and many is sufficient

tragedy” J. R. R. Tolkien. *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. London: HarperCollins, 1997. Pp. 17-18. Print.

5. *Shall*. “In the second and third persons, expressing the speaker’s determination to bring about (or, with negative, to prevent) some action, event, or state of things in the future, or (occasionally) to refrain from hindering what is otherwise certain to take place, or is intended by another person” *Oxford English Dictionary* Online, 2018. Web, 16 August 2018.